

The Ornithologist and the Mob

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Byline: By KIRK WALLACE JOHNSON

Kirk Wallace Johnson is the author of "The Feather Thief: Beauty, Obsession, and the Natural History Heist of the Century."

Body

For some time, I'd been searching for Christopher Filardi, a biologist with decades of field experience in the Solomon Islands. I wanted to interview him for a book I was writing, but the email system at the American Museum of Natural History, which once listed him as the director of Pacific programs at its Center for Biodiversity and Conservation, bounced back my message.

The auto-reply said that he'd moved to another organization, Conservation International. When I wrote him there, another auto-reply informed me that he had moved on. I couldn't find him on Facebook or Twitter. The man seemed to have vanished.

When I finally found a working number for him, he was reluctant to talk. Three years ago, his life was overturned by an online mob that accused him of murder. The fact that the mob's outrage was driven by ignorance didn't make it any less frightening.

A 2017 Pew study reported that 40 percent of Americans have experienced some form of online harassment, but what Dr. Filardi experienced was far worse than a few mean tweets. He has never given an interview about what happened. He agreed to tell his story on the condition that I not reveal where he lives.

In September 2015, Dr. Filardi and a team of researchers from the museum and the University of the South Pacific ascended the rugged Chupukama Ridge, on Guadalcanal, one of the Solomon Islands, which he described in his field journal as "a sky island filled with scientific mystery." The goal of the mission was not only to study Guadalcanal's ecosystems, but to make the case for preserving them at a time when the Solomon Islands are under pressure to open more land up to logging and mining.

On the third morning, the sound of "kokoko-kiew" pulsed through the forest. The call was unmistakably a forest kingfisher's. Dr. Filardi's heart raced. For 20 years, he'd been searching for the mustached kingfisher, known as a "ghost" bird. Only three individuals, all female, had been discovered by scientists over the past century. There were no male specimens in any of the world's museums; not even a photo of one was known to exist. He got a glimpse of the bird, just a flash of blue and gold, before it vanished.

Days later, when the team captured a male in a mist net, Dr. Filardi gasped. "One of the most poorly known birds in the world was there, in front of me, like a creature of myth come to life," he wrote in a dispatch to the museum.

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While the expedition was still underway, the museum released the first photographs of the bird, which seemed to be mugging for the camera. The mustached kingfisher became a viral celebrity, under headlines like "ridiculously gorgeous."

It wasn't until the public realized that Dr. Filardi had "collected" the bird -- killing it for the museum's research collection -- that the adulation turned to venom.

Marc Bekoff, a researcher focusing on animal consciousness at the University of Colorado, Boulder, fumed on HuffPost that killing "'in the name of education' or 'in the name of whatever' simply needs to stop." He added, "It is wrong and sets a horrific precedent for future research and for children."

Colleen O'Brien, a director at PETA, condemned it as "perverse, cruel and the sort of act that has led to the extinction of other animals who were also viewed as 'specimens.'" All that was needed to document the bird, she argued, was "compassion, awe and a camera, not disregard and a death warrant."

While Dr. Filardi was still on the mountain, almost entirely off the grid, the rage spread. Tens of thousands of people signed petitions that condemned his actions, and thousands more signed a petition calling for him to be fired, or even jailed.

The museum frantically tried to reach him. People were trying to hack into his Facebook account, which was quickly disabled. The pages of his children were targeted. His wife began receiving phone calls with death threats, at all hours of the night. A petition that stated, "Chris Filardi is a disgrace and frankly does not deserve to breathe another breath," was signed by 3,798 people.

He descended from the mountaintop into an inferno of hate. "If they wanted to make me feel horrible and more than a little frightened for my family or welfare," he told me, his voice strained, "it worked."

When he returned to the museum in New York, police officers told him to "be conscious" of how he entered it, never walking in the front door with the rest of the public, but using a back door instead.

Dr. Filardi hoped the threats were just talk, but he kept thinking back to May 2001, when an eco-terrorist group known as the Earth Liberation Front firebombed the Center for Urban Horticulture at the University of Washington, where Dr. Filardi was a graduate student. The bombing was aimed at the work of a professor they mistakenly believed was releasing genetically engineered poplar trees into the wild. (No one was hurt.)

Still, Dr. Filardi wanted to engage, if only to defend his field and the museum, which he had been visiting since his childhood. "I felt like a failed ambassador of the natural sciences," he told me.

He wrote an essay for Audubon explaining the many steps he'd taken to ensure that the taking of a single kingfisher would not cause harm, including a survey of the population, which he estimated at 4,000 -- a "robust number for a large island bird." He highlighted the role the bird played in conservation efforts: After his findings were presented to tribal, local and national officials, they resolved to protect the area from being mined or logged.

His essay received over 900 comments, the most up-voted of which called him a murderer.

The mustached kingfisher was not gathered for public display, as a "trophy," as many claimed. It resides in a carefully maintained part of the museum dedicated to research alongside nearly a million other ornithological specimens, none of which spawned death threats.

Some of the birds in the world's museum and university collections were gathered before the word "scientist" was even coined. The naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace described them as the "individual letters" that "make up one of the volumes of our earth's history." Each scientific advance -- the discovery of the nucleus, viruses, genes, DNA -- has led to new ways of studying the same historic birds.

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These collections have also directly contributed to policies that have helped wildlife. The pesticide DDT was ultimately banned after a comparison of museum egg specimens revealed that shells had grown thinner after it was introduced. A study of 120 years' worth of seabird skins demonstrated rising levels of mercury in the ocean.

The collections almost certainly hold answers to questions that researchers haven't yet thought to pose about the changes happening to our planet. And in this age of the Sixth Extinction, the collections are becoming even more vital.

When I asked Dr. Filardi whether he could have obtained what he needed for research by simply plucking a feather -- a suggestion made by many online -- he bristled. "All a feather gets you is DNA, and that's not a magic wand!" With the specimen, though, "we have RNA, a skeleton, gonads, tissues in cryogenic storage."

He continued, "In 100 years, there's going to be all sorts of ways to utilize this that we don't even know yet."

This is not just his opinion, but the overwhelming consensus among field biologists. After a 2014 article in *Science* suggested that specimen collection might play a role in species extinction unless a code of ethics was adopted, over 100 museum and university researchers signed a strident rebuttal, outlining the rigorous legal and ethical guidelines already governing collecting.

Those condemning a scientist for killing one bird might first wrestle with the fact that American house cats kill as many as four billion backyard birds a year. An additional 600 million to 900 million birds slam into our buildings. The mining of rare metals used to build the very phones and computers that Dr. Filardi's detractors used to call for his head endanger the survival of birds and other creatures those people claim to defend.

It's also no coincidence that the uproar seems reserved for only the most beautiful animals. The same month that Dr. Filardi's life was upended, a team lead by Jake Esselstyn of Louisiana State University discovered a new species, the hog-nosed rat, on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi. The rat, which has uniquely long pubic hair, was killed and preserved for future research, but there are no petitions calling for Dr. Esselstyn's firing.

In the end, it was Dr. Filardi's children -- who had grown up in the age of cyberbullying -- who reassured him that the online threats were unlikely to translate into real-world violence. They helped him understand what he described as "the nameless ease with which people can violently assault and denigrate, to feed a sense of righteousness" before moving on to their next digital target.

Although Facebook and Twitter have outlined the types of threats -- murder, sexual assault and breaking bones -- that violate their rules, the burden is usually on those being threatened to flag the comments. Moderators are overwhelmed, and punishments are often as mild as a "time out." Artificial intelligence isn't a magical fix, either: Last fall, a Japanese Twitter user's account was frozen after what was probably an algorithm flagged him for tweeting a death threat at a mosquito.

Nine months after he discovered the mustached kingfisher, Dr. Filardi left the American Museum of Natural History. He told me that he was worried about doing damage to an institution that he loved -- people were threatening to pull donations -- but that he was not pushed out. He still collaborates with the museum and with Conservation International, and has just returned to the Solomon Islands with a new organization.

Before he left for the islands, he told me he was "not bitter" about what had happened.

"I understand and empathize with the challenge of confronting the taking of another life to feed the intellect of humans," he said. "I try to give people the benefit of the doubt."

But I couldn't help but be outraged on his behalf that people claiming to act in wildlife's name had ruthlessly harassed someone who had done more than most of us to understand and protect the natural world. And I worried about the effect of that harassment on other scientists in his field.

Van Remsen, the curator of birds at Louisiana State University's Museum of Natural Science, told me that the Filardi affair hasn't changed his mind about the importance of collecting. "Almost every kingfisher that has ever lived

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has suffered a more painful death than the one Filardi collected, either being eaten alive by a predator or from the inside by a disease," he said. "If we thought for a second that what we were doing is wrong in terms of hurting populations, we wouldn't be doing it."

But it has led him -- and many other ornithologists with whom I spoke, almost all of whom asked me not to use their names -- to be extremely cautious about attracting any kind of attention. Many research expeditions are no longer being publicized; in some cases, there is a total blackout on media. As a result, the public will grow even less informed about the importance of this research.

You can't blame the scientists. One distinguished ornithologist lamented the new culture of fear. "Some crazy vegan lady just shot up YouTube," he said. "Who knows what could happen?"

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/15/opinion/sunday/moustached-kingfisher-internet-harassment.html>

Graphic

PHOTO: The mustached kingfisher. (PHOTOGRAPH BY ROBERT MOYLE) (SR4) DRAWING (DRAWING BY PING ZHU)

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